

Just Wondering by theamiableanachronism

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Summary:

Turns out asking someone to the Snow Ball actually IS a lot harder than it looks.

Just Wondering

It happened after one of their visits to the cabin.

They'd all spent a Saturday afternoon there, keeping up the tradition they'd started as soon as Will and El had recovered, and played Monopoly until well into the evening. Chief would have said it was more like "battling", but eventually the game ended (the winner being Max; video games weren't the only thing she was kickass at) and they all got ready to leave, bundling themselves up against the late November chill. Max and Lucas and Dustin and Will all headed out first, having said goodbye to El and the Chief. Mike hung back a little longer, like he always did, so they headed down the path to where Jonathan was waiting to take them home, like they always did.

Normally, they would all be talking at once, usually arguing about the outcome of the game or how the movie ended, but tonight, Dustin and Will were the only ones talking, with Will insisting that there was no way Dustin buying that fourth hotel would have changed anything, and Dustin insisting that it was the house, not the hotel, that would have made him the winner this time. Usually, Max would have joined in, defending her title as board game champion, but tonight she was uncharacteristically quiet, hanging back a little, scuffing her feet at the scattered branches on the forest floor as she walked.

The others were too wrapped up in their argument to notice them falling behind, so Lucas shoved his hands into his pockets and slowed his pace to allow her to catch up. Once she did, he stepped in close enough for her to hear him quietly ask, "Hey, um... you okay, Max?" She looked up, as if confused by his question, and frowned.

"Uh, yeah, why?"

He shrugged. "You're just kind of quiet."

"Oh." She looked down again, kicking a rock with the toe of her Converse. "I'm fine," she said, looking away, so he nodded, not wanting to push the issue.

"Okay."

They walked on in silence for a moment until suddenly, she stopped and turned to face him.

"Hey."

"Yeah?"

“Are you guys going to that thing?”

“What thing?”

“That Snow Ball, or whatever. I saw the flyer on El’s wall in there.”

Lucas chuckled. “Oh, that? I don’t know, yeah, probably. Why?”

She looked at him for a minute, frowning, like she wanted to say something but didn’t know how. Finally, she shrugged. “Just wondering.” And she took off down the path.

Lucas stood there and watched her go. Then the light bulb came on.

“Max!” he called, quickening his pace until he’d caught up to where she’d stopped, looking at him questioningly.

“What?”

He stopped in front of her, his breath puffing out in small clouds. When he didn’t say anything, she raised her eyebrows and put her hands in her coat pockets.

“Well? What did you want?”

Now that he was standing in front of her, the burst of inspiration that had led him to call out her name suddenly fizzled out. He wondered if Mike had had as hard a time when he asked El. Because that was what he was trying to do, he remembered. Ask Max to the Snow Ball. When she’d asked about it, it had taken him a few minutes to realize that this was an opportunity he should take. Sure, they’d been hanging out a lot more lately, and sure, he hadn’t missed the way she smiled and laughed around him that was different from how she did around the others. Sure, he’d noticed, because he did it too. But to actually ask her to a dance? The weight of that kind of step crashed in on him all at once and left his mind a complete blank. And to top it off, his stomach was doing somersaults and something was stuck in his throat, keeping the words from coming out. When he realized that thing was his own tongue, he swallowed and opened his mouth.

“Did you want to go?”

“Go?”

He took a deep breath. No going back now. “To the Snow Ball.”

Her lips quirked up in a smile and she quickly ducked her head, as if trying to hide her reaction. He watched her, wondering with a growing sense of panic if he’d somehow misinterpreted her question, but then she looked back up, smile still intact.

“With you?” she asked.

Slightly relieved that she was at least smiling, but still a little worried because that wasn’t exactly a “yes”, he breathed out a “Yeah! I mean, if- ”

“Sure.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Yeah?”

She thrust her head forward in a shrug, her smile continuing to broaden, lifting her rosy cheeks until her eyes crinkled at the corners.

“Yeah!”

He let out a breath he didn’t realize he’d been holding and grinned.

“Wow! Okay, great!”

“Great,” she repeated, biting her bottom lip in a grin as they turned back to the path. Up ahead, Lucas could see Dustin waiting for them outside the car, holding the back door open.

“Would you two hurry up, we’re freezing our butts off out here!” he said, throwing his arms up.

“You didn’t have to wait outside the car,” Max shot back, flicking the bill of his cap up as she slid into the backseat.

“That’s what I told him!” Will said from the passenger seat as Dustin readjusted his hat with a frown.

“Where’s Mike?” Jonathan asked just as Mike came running down the path.

“Sorry,” he panted as he came to a stop next to Dustin.

“Say goodbye to El?” Dustin asked with a grin.

Mike rolled his eyes and slid in next to Lucas. “Would you just get in already?” he said, exasperated.

Dustin clambered in, looking amused, and Jonathan set off down the road, the heater running full blast and melting some of the frost they’d accumulated in the walk back to the car. They had barely moved before Dustin asked, “So are we going to this Snow Ball or what?”

Max grinned in the window’s reflection and squeezed the hand she’d grabbed as soon as Lucas slid in next to her.